

BEHIND THE MOSAIC: INSURGENT CENTERS OF GRAVITY AND COUNTERINSURGENCY

**A Monograph
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Abstract

BEHIND THE MOSAIC: INSURGENT CENTERS OF GRAVITY AND COUNTERINSURGENCY by Major Jonathan P. Klug, US Army, 71 pages.

Given ongoing conflicts and the likelihood of executing counterinsurgency in the future, it is vital to conduct effective campaign planning for counterinsurgency. Additionally, effective campaign planning is essential for rapid and effective operational and tactical adaptation. Center of gravity analysis is a tool that can be useful to support these activities. This monograph validated the hypothesis that there are multiple centers of gravity in counterinsurgency that vary by insurgent purpose, location, approach, and phase.

Leaders and planners need to place centers of gravity in their proper context. Countering an insurgency requires understanding the operational environment, which the monograph often refers to as a mosaic. Fighting an insurgency or multiple insurgencies is fighting a mosaic war, and centers of gravity determine the nature of tactical areas of operation.

Center of gravity analysis can help avoid the historical conceptual planning problems, such as improperly focusing on just the insurgents or just protecting the population. The population is not a center of gravity. Rather, the support of the population is often a critical requirement and a critical vulnerability. Support of the population should therefore be a strategic, operational, and tactical objective for both insurgents and counterinsurgents. There must be a balance of enemy-centric and population-centric activities that suits the current environment.

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Introduction

Counterinsurgency has defined the United States conventional military experience from the summer of 2003 to the present.¹ During this period American military forces faced multiple insurgencies in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Philippines, and other areas.² These operations brought heightened military and academic interest in counterinsurgency history, theory, and doctrine, precipitating efforts to update counterinsurgency doctrine.³ The U.S. Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency manual, or Field Manual (FM) 3-24, is the most well known part of these doctrinal efforts. This rapidly produced counterinsurgency doctrine sparked debate on how to execute effective counterinsurgency operations. Unfortunately, misunderstanding of the concept of centers of gravity and the content of FM 3-24 led to the mistaken notion that “the people are the center of gravity.” As a consequence, some units conducting counterinsurgency operations

¹Donald P Wright and Timothy R. Reese, *On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign: The United States Army in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM: May 2003-January 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008), 87. Wright and Reese discuss that units arriving during the spring and summer of 2003 were confronted by insurgency.

²For Iraq see Gregory Fontenot, E. J. Degen, and David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom: Through 01 May 2003* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004). For Afghanistan see Donald P. Wright et al., *A Different Kind of War: The United States Army in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, October 2001-September 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Department of the Army, 2010). While there has not been a book length study of Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines, articles are available. See Eric P. Wendt, “Strategic Counterinsurgency Modeling,” *Special Warfare* 18, no. 2 (September 2005): 2-12. Also see Peter Brookes, “Flashpoint: No Bungle in the Jungle: Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines is Getting Results,” *Armed Forces Journal* (September 2007), <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2007/09/2926516> (accessed June 4, 2011).

³Counterinsurgency operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Philippines set in motion the rewriting or writing of several doctrinal manuals. New manuals included: FMI 3-07.22, *Counterinsurgency Operations*; FM 3-07.1, *Security Force Assistance*; FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*; FM 3-24.2, *Tactics in Counterinsurgency*; JP 3-24, *Counterinsurgency Operations*; and JP 3-26, *Counterterrorism*. Updated manuals included: FM 3-0, *Full Spectrum Operations*; FM 3-07, *Stability Operations*; and FM 5-0, *The Operations Process*. Manuals that were subsumed by FM 3-24 and FM 3-24.2 included FM 90-8, *Counterinsurgency Operations* and FM 7-98, *Operations in a Low-Intensity Conflict*.

incorrectly determined centers of gravity, which led to unnecessary expenditure of time, blood, and treasure. This monograph examines centers of gravity, particularly in counterinsurgency operations in the context of multiple insurgent groups operating in one area of operations and insurgent groups using localized approaches. This monograph argues that rather than one static, monolithic center of gravity, there are multiple operational and tactical centers of gravity in counterinsurgency that vary by insurgent political purpose, location, approach, and phase.

It is a common exaggeration or misperception that the Army did not have counterinsurgency doctrine before 2003.⁴ At that time, the Army had two older manuals that discussed counterinsurgency. Field Manual (FM) 90-8, *Counterinsurgency Operations*, published in 1986, and 1992 FM 7-98, *Operations in a Low-Intensity Conflict*, published in 1992. To update its counterinsurgency doctrine, the Army published Field Manual Interim (FMI) 3-07.22, *Counterinsurgency Operations* in October 2004. At that time, Army Lieutenant General David H. Petraeus and Marine Lieutenant General James N. Mattis were responsible for developing their respective service's doctrine, and their organizations began writing a multiservice counterinsurgency doctrinal manual in late 2005.⁵ Field Manual (FM) 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3.33-5 was the rapidly produced result of this collective effort. Many claimed that the manual was a radical break from previous Army counterinsurgency doctrine.⁶

⁴Conrad Crane, "Doctrine: United States," in *Understanding Counterinsurgency: Doctrine, Operations, and Challenges*, ed. Thomas Rid and Thomas Keaney (New York: Routledge, 2010), 59.

⁵*Ibid.*, 59-61.

⁶U.S. Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (2006; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), xxi.

Despite initial praise, FM 3-24, its historical and theoretical underpinnings and principles became heated aspects of an ongoing counterinsurgency debate.⁷

Because U.S. forces have conducted counterinsurgency throughout their past and because there will be a requirement for them to conduct counterinsurgency in the foreseeable future, examining centers of gravity as part of counterinsurgency campaign planning and operations is worthwhile. First, analyzing centers of gravity in context will help leaders articulate the nature, costs, opportunities, and risks of conducting counterinsurgency operations to policy makers. Second, clarifying this key element of operational art will aid in campaign planning, thereby likely improving the execution and probability of success of counterinsurgency operations.⁸

This monograph examines multiple insurgent areas of operation and the dynamic and varied nature of multiple insurgent operational centers of gravity, recognizing and accounting for the notion that insurgency can form a complex, shifting mosaic. More specifically, many insurgencies conduct different types and combinations of operations at the local or tactical levels. For example, in one area an insurgency can be weak and consequently conducting small-scale operations, where forces of the same insurgency in an adjacent area can be strong and conducting larger-scale operations. From a macro or theater perspective, these variations form a mosaic not

⁷While the FM 3-24 debate was widespread, a good example occurred in the pages of *Joint Forces Quarterly*. Army Colonel Gian Gentile criticized FM 3-24, stating that, “the new doctrine was written . . . without a serious professional and public debate over its efficacy, practicality, and utility.” See Gian P. Gentile, “Time for the Deconstruction of Field Manual 3-24,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 58 (3rd Quarter 2010): 116. On the other side, retired Army Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, President of the Center for a New American Security think tank and a member of the FM 3-24 writing team, supported the manual. Nagl, however, lamented the Army’s slow institutional adaptation to counterinsurgency, writing that “the Army failed to begin institutionalizing counterinsurgency learning until the 2006 development of U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*. See John A. Nagl, “Let’s Win the Wars We’re In,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 52 (1st Quarter 2009): 23.

⁸The White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2010), 14; U.S. Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, Change 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), 7-5.

of small colored tiles, but of areas of varying insurgent efforts. This contextual understanding of the mosaic nature of most insurgencies and their multiple operational centers of gravity facilitates equally nuanced and tailored efforts to effectively counter insurgency. Similarly, conducting effective counterinsurgency depends on recognizing when there are multiple insurgencies operating in the same area.⁹

The second section of this monograph is a review of key literature on centers of gravity, insurgency, centers of gravity in counterinsurgency, and the independent variables used in the case studies. The third section of the monograph is an examination of the methodology for case study selection and case study limitations. The fourth section consists of two case studies. The conclusion is the final section of the monograph and provides a summary of insights into centers of gravity in counterinsurgency.

Literature Review

This section reviews the works of authors on centers of gravity in the military context, key insurgency theory, operational and tactical centers of gravity in counterinsurgency, and defines the independent variables for the case studies. The first subsection details the origin of centers of gravity with Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*.¹⁰ Next, the literature review has a subsection that examines the interpretations of Clausewitz's center of gravity concept. The third

⁹U.S. Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), 1-8; Kyle Teamey and LTC Jonathan Sweet, "Organizing Intelligence for Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* 86, no. 5 (September-October 2006): 24; Phillip B. Davidson, *Secrets of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1990), 20. The literature review section will examine mosaic warfare in more detail.

¹⁰Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, 1st ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 595-597. Pages 595-597 are not the first time that Clausewitz mentions the concept of centers of gravity; however, these pages provide his best explanation and discussion of the concept. Although the contemporary terminology differed, Clausewitz's original concept was useful for what current doctrine refers to as strategic and operational centers of gravity.

subsection details some of the key insurgent theory required to select and then examine the case studies. The fourth subsection examines some key points on the population in counterinsurgency and discusses both operational and tactical centers of gravity. The final subsection details the independent variables used in the case studies to validate this monograph's hypothesis.

Clausewitz

Carl von Clausewitz's discussion on a center of gravity appears relatively late in *On War*. Clausewitz stated that: "[O]ne must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind. Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends."¹¹ Based on this statement, each belligerent has a center of gravity, and a center of gravity must be determined in relative opposition. In other words, each side's center of gravity emerges depending on its political aims in opposition to the opposition's political aims. Thus, Clausewitz explicitly supports the notion that multiple centers of gravity vary by time, space, and purpose.

While Clausewitz's key statement on a center of gravity defines a single center of gravity, he allowed for multiple centers of gravity. He stated that it was a goal or ideal to analyze back to the fewest number or, preferably, to one center of gravity. Clausewitz outlined two aspects important when attempting to isolate a single center of gravity. The first was to examine the distribution of political power. For example, an alliance may have only one center of gravity if the members of that alliance only loosely share political interests. The second analytical aspect was the situation in the theater of war. "[T]he effect that events in a given theater will have elsewhere can only be judged in each particular case. Only then can it be seen how far the

¹¹Clausewitz, 595-596.

enemy's various centers of gravity can be reduced to one."¹² Clausewitz added, that when an enemy's "resistance cannot be reduced to a single center of gravity . . . two almost wholly separate wars have to be fought simultaneously."¹³

Clausewitz felt that centers of gravity simultaneously cause the greatest impact on the enemy and are a target for the enemy. Thus, centers of gravity are a concentration of combat power; a concentration of combat power that can attack or be attacked. Clausewitz felt that force should be concentrated to strike a cohesive army and excess mass in striking a less coherent force is a waste and is part of the tension between dispersing forces to control territory and massing forces to strike. This major battle is often "a collision between two centers of gravity; the more forces we can concentrate in our center of gravity, the more certain and massive the effect will be."¹⁴ Thus, centers of gravity clashing in a major battle will have an effect on the entire theater.

Cohesion was another key consideration for centers of gravity. Fighting forces have unity through cohesion, and "[w]here there is cohesion, the analogy of the center gravity can be applied."¹⁵ Clausewitz also drew a distinction between the cohesion of a single army and an allied force. The former naturally has more cohesion than the latter, as one represents a single body politic and the other separate political groups. Clausewitz said that in coalitions political unity varies by degree between how each coalition member pursues independent interests or if there is dominant leader. Further, if defeating one foe will break the coalition, this one foe is the center of

¹²Ibid., 617-618.

¹³Clausewitz, 623.

¹⁴Ibid., 248, 486-487, 489, 583, 596.

¹⁵Ibid., 486.

gravity. This is one of the exceptions where it is not “realistic to reduce several centers of gravity to one.”¹⁶

According to Clausewitz there were several possibilities for centers of gravity. In most cases he said that the center of gravity was the army; however, for a small country with a protector nation, the center of gravity may be the army of the protector. The center of gravity for alliances is shared interest amongst the members of the alliance or, in other words, what holds it together and working towards common goals and interests. Finally, Clausewitz said, “in countries subject to domestic strife, the center of gravity is generally the capital.”¹⁷

Clausewitz discussed centers of gravity in the chapter, “The People in Arms.” As Clausewitz linked his notion of centers of gravity to strength and concentration, he felt armed civilians were not a center of gravity. Armed civilians, however, could attack the invader’s center of gravity. Clausewitz recommended that armed civilians only “nibble at the shell and around the edges”¹⁸ and must not concentrate to avoid destruction. The resistance of the armed civilians would set the example that would “spread like a brush fire,”¹⁹ spurring further resistance and eroding the invaders’ strength and will. Clausewitz clearly felt the prospects of armed civilians succeeding alone were low, and that armed civilians should support a regular army.²⁰

Interpretations of Centers of Gravity

This subsection examines several authors’ thoughts regarding and centers of gravity. First, Dr. Shimon Naveh’s thoughts on operational theory are essential reading, as operational

¹⁶Ibid., 596-597.

¹⁷Clausewitz, 596, 633.

¹⁸Ibid., 480.

¹⁹Ibid., 481.

²⁰Ibid., 481-482.

theory is vital to understand centers of gravity in context. Second, the monograph discusses Dr. Joe Strange's interpretation of centers of gravity and his critical factors methodology. Third, Dr. Milan Vego's thought on centers of gravity at the operational level of war is useful. Finally, Dr. Antulio Echevarria's works provide a unique, insightful perspective on the concept of centers of gravity. Overall, these interpretations are unfortunately often contradictory, but the contradictions are often nuanced; therefore, the literature on centers of gravity requires much study and reflection. Importantly for this monograph, this subsection demonstrates that these authors accept, explicitly or implicitly, that multiple centers of gravity can vary with time, space, and purpose.

Shimon Naveh

Retired Israeli Reserve Brigadier General Shimon Naveh wrote extensively on operational art and systemic operational design, and this subsection provides a short examination of his operational theory, including his discussion of centers of gravity. Additionally, this subsection very briefly surveys Soviet operational history and theory, as they are the basis of Naveh's work.

The Soviet operational pioneers included Svechin, Tukhachevsky, Triandafilov, Isserson, and others. Retired U.S. Army Colonel David Glantz and Dr. Harold Orenstein provided key Soviet contributions to the theory and practice of operational art in a two volume work: *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art, 1927-1991*. In his summary of the Soviet theorists, Glantz pointed out that the Soviets viewed military art as "the theory and practice of preparing for and conducting military operations."²¹ More importantly, the Soviets subdivided military art into the

²¹David M. Glantz, ed., *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art, 1927-1991: Volume I, Operational Art, 1927-1964*, trans. Harold S. Orenstein (Portland, OR: Frank Cass and Co., 1995), xvi. The second volume covers 1965 to 1991.

interrelated fields of strategy, operations, and tactics.²² These fields, or levels as current doctrine refers to them, have distinct standards of mission, scale, scope, and duration.²³

An extensive study of the history and theory of operational art underpinned Naveh's work. Naveh believes that before the Napoleonic Wars was the "age of the *strategy of the single point* [emphasis original],"²⁴ where commanders sought a single, decisive battle. However, warfare began to change during the Napoleonic Wars. Based on this historical study, Naveh asserted that the drastic growth of nineteenth-century military forces, which in turn expanded operations in time and space. The integration of operations distributed in time and space distributed operations into a coherent whole in the hallmark of operational art. Similarly, simultaneous and successive operations are the "heart of operational art."²⁵

Soviet theorist G. K. Isserson's study of warfare led him to conclude that modern operations "*must be ready to overcome the entire depth* [emphasis original]."²⁶ With these three points in mind, a single battle could not be decisive; only a series of battles that attacked in depth could be decisive.²⁷ This fact led to the expansion of warfare in time and space precipitated the genesis of abstract concept of operational art. Naveh provided the arguably best explanation of

²²David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle* (New York: Frank Cass and Company, 1991), 12-13.

²³Glantz, *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art, 1927-1991: Volume I, Operational Art, 1927-1964*, xvi.

²⁴Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (New York: Frank Cass Publishers, 1997), 75, 181-183; James J. Schneider, *Vulcan's Anvil: The American Civil War and the Foundations of Operational Art* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff College, 1992), 1.

²⁵James J. Schneider, "The Loose Marble--and the Origins of Operational Art," *Parameters: US Army War College Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (March 1989): 87.

²⁶Richard Harrison, *Architect of Soviet Victory in World War II: The Life and Theories of G. S. Isserson* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2010), 109; Naveh, 230.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 147.

operational theory and operational art. He felt that, “The essence of [the operational] level, as the intermediary field between strategy and tactics, is the preparation, planning, and conduct of military operations in order to attain operational objectives and strategic aims.”²⁸ Naveh articulates that operational campaigns occur within a theater and accomplish strategic goal within a framework of time and space. Naveh also noted that an independent command conducts a campaign.²⁹

Systems theory is at the core of Naveh’s explanation of operational art, and his use of this approach is arguably Naveh’s key contribution to operational theory. Naveh uses systems theory to demonstrate that operations exist in a framework between two belligerent systems to attempt to achieve their objects. In fact, this framework is itself a system. As each belligerent attempts reach its ends, their efforts disturb the overall system. The overarching system and its components attempt to overcome these disturbances and maintain system equilibrium. As each belligerent’s operations attempt to disturb the system, they cause violent clashes with their contending systems, which are part of the larger system.³⁰

Naveh felt that using centers of gravity “must involve cunning, which is the essence of operational art, at its best.”³¹ To Naveh centers of gravity played a vital role within the larger framework of the theater, war plans, and campaigns and that there were three elements for centers of gravity. First, planners must identify the points of strength and weakness in the opposing system. Second, the friendly force must create vulnerabilities in the opposing system. Third,

²⁸Naveh, 9-10.

²⁹Ibid., 13.

³⁰Ibid., 15.

³¹Ibid., 19.

maneuver strikes must exploit such vulnerabilities. These three elements combined both physical and cognitive operational vulnerabilities.³²

Naveh implicitly supports that notion that multiple centers of gravity vary by time, space, and purpose. First, he points out that a campaign has an aim, or purpose, and a defined framework of time and space. Second, Naveh continually stresses that the operational field of war is dynamic and that successful operational art must be equally dynamic. Third, he believes that operational art must address the ubiquitous factor of randomness and chaos, as the various elements within the system have a dynamic interaction. Fourth, Naveh's use of systems theory inherently distributes multiple centers of gravity in space and purpose. Fifth, Naveh explicitly mentions that centers of gravity are dynamic. Finally, he repeatedly points to the importance of synchronization, which arranges activities in time, space, and purpose. This implicitly demonstrates the dynamic nature of warfare in general and centers of gravity specifically.³³

Joe Strange

Dr. Joe Strange is an influential recent interpreter of Clausewitz's work on centers of gravity. In fact, U.S. joint doctrine adopted key aspects of his thought on centers of gravity. Strange's most important work is his 1996 monograph *Centers of Gravity & Critical Vulnerabilities*, where Strange promulgated his centers of gravity methodology and provided instruction on how to determine centers of gravity at each level of war. The "CG-CC-CR-CV" concept is the core of his work. This concept consisted of centers of gravity (CG), critical capabilities (CC), critical requirements (CR), and critical vulnerabilities (CV). This concept provided depth and breadth to determining centers of gravity and, therefore, facilitated understanding the operational environment and informed planning. Strange's concept also

³²Naveh, 19.

³³Ibid., 10, 13, 167, 232, 308-309.

supported his assertion that centers of gravity are not characteristics, locations, or capabilities, but they are moral, political, and physical entities that either possess characteristics and capabilities, or benefit from a given location or terrain. Most importantly for this monograph, Strange explicitly supports that multiple centers of gravity vary by time, space, and purpose.³⁴

Strange subdivided centers of gravity into moral and physical types. Moral centers of gravity could include leaders and popular support, and physical centers of gravity could include military forces, economic power, and large populations. Strange also emphasized that centers of gravity are dynamic, meaning they vary with time and by context.

Strange defined critical capabilities as the primary abilities which make a center of gravity as such in the context of a given scenario. Strange's examples of CCs were to remain alive, stay informed, communicate, and remain influential. As they are something that the center of gravity does, critical capabilities are normally verbs. The third aspect was critical requirements, which are conditions, resources, or means for a CC fully effective. An example of a CR was the support of the people and powerful national leaders. CRs are normally nouns. Finally, critical vulnerabilities are deficient or vulnerable CRs or CR components; thus, one can exploit CVs in order to attack an enemy center of gravity. Strange also emphasized that a center of gravity cannot be a critical vulnerability at the same time. Like CRs, CVs are normally nouns.³⁵

Milan Vego

Dr. Milan Vego provided contemporary discussion on joint operational warfare and operational art. According to Vego, destruction of a center of gravity will have a decisive affect on a belligerent's ability to achieve an objective and that an effective plan therefore relies on the

³⁴Joe Strange, *Centers of Gravity & Critical Vulnerabilities*, Perspectives on Warfighting No. 4 (Quantico: Marine Corps University, 1997), 43-48.

³⁵Ibid., 43-51, 74.

proper determination of the friendly and enemy centers of gravity. Determining centers of gravity are therefore essential to operational art and improves the chances of a short and effective military effort. Vego also very aptly points out that “tactical actions are useful only when linked together as part of a larger design framed by strategy and orchestrated by operational art.”³⁶ As center of gravity analysis is essential to successful operational art, it is vital to ensure that tactical and operational efforts contribute to attacking the enemy operational and tactical centers of gravity and protecting friendly operational and tactical centers of gravity. Vego also mentioned that modern ground forces are smaller and more dispersed than during World War II; thus, land combat is growing more like air and naval warfare—forces are more dispersed yet have massed effects.³⁷

Vego differentiated centers of gravity into nonmilitary and military types. The former could include the will to fight, a key leader, an ideology, or a government’s legitimacy. The latter could be a military force or function, such as an elite formation or command and control. Vego made a vital observation that an enemy is not fully defeated until the relevant mass of power—the relevant center of gravity—is defeated. Vego began his analytical concept for centers of gravity with the key point that centers of gravity cannot be determined in a vacuum. He asserted that, the objective is a principal factor to determine the center of gravity and the solution to any military problem. When conducting center of gravity analysis, one must examine the belligerents’ objectives in relative opposition to each other, which implicitly means that centers of gravity vary by time, space, and purpose.³⁸

³⁶Milan Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2007), VII-13, I-3.

³⁷*Ibid.*, VII-13.

³⁸*Ibid.*, VII-13 to VII-14.

To accomplish the military end state, Vego asserted that there is a required set of military and nonmilitary aspects of the situation, and he referred to these aspects as critical factors. The three types are critical strengths, critical weaknesses, and critical vulnerabilities. Critical strengths are an essential capability required to accomplish an objective. For the strategic level, the leader of a nation, coalition, insurgency, or extremist group is typically the most important critical strength. Vego's second type is critical weaknesses. Critical weaknesses are a source of power necessary to achieve an objective, but the capability is not adequate for the requirement. For example, an insurgency's critical weakness could be the population's waning support of their cause. Finally, Vego examines critical vulnerabilities. These are military or nonmilitary sources of power that are vulnerable to attack, control, leverage, or exploitation. As an example, Vego stated that the U.S. aversion to casualties helped weaken U.S. resolve during the Vietnam War.³⁹

Vego believed that the higher the level of war, the more static the centers of gravity. In other words, there are less frequent shifts among strategic centers of gravity than operational centers of gravity and, similarly, frequent shifts in tactical centers of gravity relative to shifts in operational centers of gravity. Thus, Vego believes that centers of gravity are fluid, underscoring that there are often multiple centers of gravity at each level of war that vary depending on time, space, and purpose.⁴⁰

Vego provided several key insights into insurgent centers of gravity. First, the strategic objective is predominantly nonmilitary and is often ideological in nature. As an example, ideology is a critical strength of al Qaeda. For the government fighting an insurgency, the strategic objective is predominantly nonmilitary and is often how the population views an insurgency's or a government's legitimacy. Insurgents will seek to attack the government's

³⁹Vego, VII-17 to VII-19.

⁴⁰Ibid.

strategic center of gravity—its legitimacy. Consequently, the government must seek to protect and improve its legitimacy. Legitimacy is a critical strength based on how the population views the justness of the government’s actions. As the insurgents often seek to undermine and, consequently, exploit poor government legitimacy, those conducting counterinsurgency must protect and bolster government legitimacy. Second, insurgents conducting guerrilla warfare will rarely present a physical operational center of gravity, as their forces will normally remain dispersed to avoid destruction. Instead, insurgent commanders and forces will often be tactical centers of gravity, although if these forces concentrate they could be an operational center of gravity.⁴¹

Antulio Echevarria

Dr. Antulio Echevarria is a Clausewitzian scholar and has written several pieces on Clausewitz’s center of gravity concept. Echevarria believes that it remains valid and useful. He suggests that, “the concept’s advocates have perhaps been too optimistic, and its critics too skeptical.”⁴² Echevarria draws a distinction between these efforts and what Clausewitz intended.

Echevarria examines the influence of contemporary science on Clausewitz’s concept of centers gravity, as understanding the scientific concept upon which Clausewitz based his military concept provides insight into Clausewitz’s military concept. Nineteenth-century physicists described a center of gravity as the point where gravitational forces converge within an object and that removal of the center of gravity should cause collapse. More importantly for this monograph, Clausewitz’s approach mirrored that of science: successfully striking a center of gravity would

⁴¹Vego, VII-15, VII-20.

⁴²Antulio J. Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 177.

shatter the object, or, in a military setting, lead to victory.⁴³ Echevarria also showed that a scientific center of gravity is not an individual's source of strength, but is concerned with balance.⁴⁴ Second, a "center of gravity is not a weakness, per se, though it can be weak, or vulnerable if it is exposed."⁴⁵

According to Echevarria, many have misunderstood Clausewitz's center of gravity concept, and Echevarria explored what he suggests Clausewitz really meant. First, one can apply Clausewitz's concept wherever there is unity, connectivity, and interdependence with respect to enemy forces and the space occupied. Echevarria provides a long quotation from Clausewitz that is worth repeating here:

Just as the center of gravity is always found where the mass is most concentrated, and just as every blow directed against the body's center of gravity yields the greatest effect, and—more to the point—the strongest blow is the one delivered by the center of gravity, the same is true of war. The armed forces of every combatant, whether an individual state or an alliance of states, have a certain unity and thus a certain *interdependence* or *connectivity* (*Zusammenhang*) [emphasis Echevarria's]; and where such interdependence exists, we can apply the center of gravity concept. Accordingly, there exist *within* [emphasis Echevarria's] these armed forces certain centers of gravity which, by their movement and direction, exert a decisive influence over all other points; and these centers of gravity exist *where* [emphasis Echevarria's] the forces are most concentrated. However, just as in the world of inanimate bodies where the effect on a center of gravity is at once limited and enhanced by the interdependence of the parts, the same is true in war.⁴⁶

⁴³Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 179-180; Antulio J. Echevarria, "Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: Changing our Warfighting Doctrine--Again!" (Monograph, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2002), 5-6. Here Echevarria underscores how Clausewitz's concept was closer to the physics analogy. See also, Antulio J. Echevarria "Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: It's Not What We Thought!," *Naval War College Review* 56, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 10-110.

⁴⁴Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 179-180; Echevarria, "Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: Changing our Warfighting Doctrine--Again!," vi, 8; Echevarria "Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: It's Not What We Thought!," 112-113.

⁴⁵Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 179-180; Echevarria, "Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: Changing our Warfighting Doctrine--Again!," 8.

⁴⁶Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 180-181. The quotation is originally from Clausewitz, 485, although Echevarria has added italicized emphasis and included on

Thus, Echevarria believed that Clausewitz's center of gravity concept was "a focal point . . . where energies came together to be redirected and refocused elsewhere,"⁴⁷ and Echevarria provides a plausible example that al Qaeda's strategic center of gravity may be its ideology. Furthermore, Echevarria's example supports the notion that, center of gravity refers "less to the concentrated forces than to the actual element that causes them to concentrate and gives them purpose and direction."⁴⁸ Echevarria also stated that centers of gravity have spheres of effectiveness or spheres of influence; thus, a moving center of gravity will draw in forces as they come into its sphere of influence. Echevarria states that, "[i]n short, Clausewitz's centers of gravity draw energy and resources to themselves, and then redirect them elsewhere: they possess centripetal . . . force, which they can convert into a centrifugal . . . power."⁴⁹ This means that a Clausewitzian center of gravity is more than just a powerful entity that strikes a blow or friendly forces must protect; it is a powerful entity that provides unity to forces at a specific level of war. Finally, Echevarria's interpretation implicitly demonstrates that centers of gravity vary by time, space, and purpose.

Echevarria believes that his views on centers of gravity resonate with today's counterinsurgency. First, he states that "the personalities of key leaders, a state's capital, or its network of allies and their community of interests might perform the centripetal or centralizing

parenthetical referencing the original German word. Echevarria is also using a different translation than the Michael Howard and Peter Paret translation. See also, Echevarria, "Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: Changing our Warfighting Doctrine--Again!," vi, 10; Echevarria, "Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: It's Not What We Thought!," 112-113.

⁴⁷Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 181. As mentioned previously, Vego also believes that al Qaeda's ideology is its strategic center of gravity. See Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice*, VII-15.

⁴⁸Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 181.

⁴⁹Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 181; Echevarria, "Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: Changing our Warfighting Doctrine--Again!," 11-12, 19; Echevarria, "Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: It's Not What We Thought!," 113-114.

function of a focal point.”⁵⁰ Similarly, finding a center of gravity depends on the enemy’s political connectivity, which is also useful in analyzing an insurgency’s centers of gravity; however, the enemy may have insufficient unity to have a specific center of gravity emerge or that “an adversary might not have a [center of gravity], or at least one we can attack.”⁵¹ Similarly, there may be multiple centers of gravity, although Clausewitz stressed attempting to trace this back to one.⁵² Echevarria made a superb point in that opposing centers of gravity may be different in that a physical center of gravity may be opposing a moral one. His example is an army pitted against public opinion. Not only can this asymmetry prove difficult in execution, but it can also bring disproportionate effects.⁵³ Finally, “Centers of gravity are more than critical capabilities . . . [which] if attacked . . . bring about the complete collapse of an opponent.”⁵⁴

Summary

The four theorists assessed above all explicitly or implicitly accept that multiple centers of gravity can vary by time, space, and purpose. Naveh’s use of systems theory implicitly and some of his statements explicitly support this notion. Strange’s methodology and examples also implicitly and explicitly support that multiple centers of gravity can vary by time, space, and purpose. Vego and Echevarria’s thoughts on centers of gravity also support this notion.

⁵⁰Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 182; Echevarria, “Clausewitz’s Center of Gravity: Changing our Warfighting Doctrine--Again!,” vii; Echevarria, “Clausewitz’s Center of Gravity: It’s Not What We Thought!,” 114.

⁵¹Echevarria, “Clausewitz’s Center of Gravity: Changing our Warfighting Doctrine--Again!,” 5.

⁵²Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 183; Echevarria, “Clausewitz’s Center of Gravity: It’s Not What We Thought!,” 115.

⁵³Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 184.

⁵⁴Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 185; Echevarria, “Clausewitz’s Center of Gravity: Changing our Warfighting Doctrine--Again!,” 12-13.

Consequently, these four theorists' works are consistent with the independent variables and methodology used in this monograph's case studies.

Insurgent Theory

This subsection of the literature review examines two key areas of insurgent theory. First, the subsection examines Mao's revolutionary warfare, which continues to impact contemporary insurgent theory. Second, this subsection addresses the communist Vietnamese's *dau tranh*, whose mosaic approach provides insight into localized insurgent efforts and countering multiple insurgencies' localized efforts. Both theories support the notion that insurgent centers of gravity vary by time, space, and purpose. Finally, these two theories are necessary for the case studies.

Mao and Revolutionary Warfare

Contemporary insurgents continue to use revolutionary warfare to attempt to reach their desired goals. Experts see Mao Tse-tung as a key revolutionary warfare theorist, even referring to him as "the founder of protracted revolutionary warfare."⁵⁵ Some contemporary analysts further opine that Mao's approach remains the "most sophisticated form of revolutionary warfare."⁵⁶ Mao's approach, however, did not materialize overnight. Years of struggle, many Chinese lives, and the Japanese invasion of China formed a crucible for Mao's theory,⁵⁷ allowing him to form "a synthesis between guerrilla warfare and mass organization."⁵⁸

⁵⁵John J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War* (1966; repr., St. Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 2005), 27.

⁵⁶Thomas A. Marks, *Maoist Insurgency since Vietnam* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1996), 2. This subsumes the refinements others have made to Mao's original theory, such as the Vietnamese approach to revolutionary warfare.

⁵⁷Mao Tse-tung's early life included working on a farm, education, and interest in politics, including joining the Chinese Communist Party. Mao led an abortive uprising in Hunan, resulting in retreat to an isolated mountain village. In 1934, CCP leaders decided to abandon their base due to relentless Nationalist pressure, leading to a year-long march where the vast majority

Mao's theory had several key points. First, his thesis for winning the revolutionary war in China was to "uphold the strategy of protracted war and campaigns of quick decision."⁵⁹ Four characteristics of the war in China framed Mao's thesis: China was a vast, semi-colonial country; the enemy was large and powerful; communist military forces were comparatively small and weak; and a close relationship of communist leaders and peasants existed. The relatively weak position of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) required protracted war to husband and slowly build strength while simultaneously eroding enemy strength. To successfully change their relative strength through a protracted effort, the communists had to understand the situation and use an appropriate approach of cyclic strategic retreat, strategic counteroffensive, or strategic offensive. Mao expected that success would require multiple iterations of retreat, counteroffensive, and offensive. This cycle demonstrated that Mao implicitly understood that centers of gravity vary by time, space, and purpose; furthermore, Mao's theory took advantage of this notion to concentrate to attack the enemy's centers of gravity and disperse to protect the friendly centers of gravity. He believed that campaigns of quick decision were required to execute these efforts to conserve manpower, fiscal resources, and military strength. Mao also emphasized the importance of the support of the peasantry to support the weak communist military forces. According to Mao, political unity is a key advantage of the CCP, the communist military forces, and the people.⁶⁰

of marchers perished. After this march, Mao found himself in "swirling levels of . . . debate and analysis." To meet this internal challenge, he read voraciously and wrote several short works. See Jonathan Spence, *Mao Zedong* (New York: Penguin Group, 1999), 1-5, 42, 73-75, 80-83, 93.

⁵⁸Marks, 8.

⁵⁹Mao Tse-tung, "Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War," in *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking, China: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 96-97.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 94-96, 113-114, 130-131, 144. The fourth characteristic is paraphrased to clarify and summarize Mao. Clausewitz's discussion of modifications in practice, that war is never an isolated act, and erosion and protraction on the defense all clearly influence Mao's thought. Clausewitz, 78, 93, 479. Clausewitz's *On War* permeated communist military and revolutionary thought, including his chapter "The People in Arms." While indirectly influenced by Clausewitz

Mao advocated studying experience and history in context, as “each historical stage has its special characteristics, and hence the laws of war in each historical stage have their special characteristics and cannot be mechanically applied in another stage.”⁶¹ Thus, Mao wrote his theory for a specific place and time: China in the late 1930s. The success of the Chinese fight against the Japanese and then the CCP’s defeat of the Nationalist Chinese also support his theory. His theory, however, is broadly applicable to revolutionary warfare, demonstrated by many insurgent groups having used or been influenced by Mao’s theory; however, some of these groups have blindly applied Mao’s theory for revolutionary warfare in China.⁶² These groups ignored Mao’s caution against copying “exactly without the slightest change in form or content, we shall be ‘cutting the feet to fit the shoe’ and be defeated.”⁶³

Mao improved this theory with subsequent additions and refinements, including the thought of Sun Tzu and ideas from Clausewitz’s “The People in Arms” chapter in *On War*.⁶⁴ In this way Mao used both practice and theory—experience fighting the Nationalist Chinese and Imperial Japanese and melding military theory from the West and East Asia—to refine his revolutionary warfare theory, solidifying his work’s continued relevance. The essence of Mao’s theory of revolutionary warfare—using a strategy of protracted war, campaigns of quick decision, and ensuring support of the people—is still applicable and influencing insurgents today. It also

from communist military thought, Mao read Clausewitz in 1937. Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London, United Kingdom: Pimlico, 2002), 47.

⁶¹Mao, 79.

⁶²An illustrative list includes Vietnam, Thailand, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Peru. Marks, 1, 19, 83, 174, 253.

⁶³Mao, 78.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 84, 88, 115; Clausewitz, 479-487.

demonstrates that Mao implicitly understood and accounted for multiple insurgent centers of gravity varying with time, space, and purpose.

Vietnamese *Dau Tranh*

Dau Tranh, roughly translated as “struggle,” was the communist Vietnamese’s formidable adaptation of Mao’s revolutionary warfare theory and practice. Unlike many of other practitioners’ attempts to use Mao’s theory, however, the communist Vietnamese understood the context of their struggle and successfully adapted their strategy to fit the operational environment.⁶⁵ Merely calling *dau tranh* a strategy does not do it justice. Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War, felt that *dau tranh*, “appeared to be an extreme and lethal form of fanaticism, and the capacity of the rebels to sustain it throughout the war would be a continuing source of fear and wonderment.”⁶⁶ *Dau tranh* was a total war, using all means to conquer South Vietnam.⁶⁷ This subsection examines *dau tranh* as it is a key factor in a subsequent case study, because it is a successful example of insurgents combining political and military aspects into a holistic approach, and since it supports the notion that multiple insurgent centers of gravity vary by time, space, and purpose.

Communist military leader General Vo Nguyen Giap summarized *dau tranh* by stating, “We not only conduct an armed struggle but also have the benefit of the masses’ fierce political

⁶⁵Davidson, *Secrets of the Vietnam War*, 18; Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam* (New York: Presidio Press, 1986), 214; George K. Tanham, *Communist Revolutionary Warfare: From the Vietminh to the Viet Cong*, rev. ed. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 2-3. This case study uses “Communist Vietnamese” in reference to both the North Vietnamese and communist insurgents in South Vietnam.

⁶⁶Robert S. McNamara, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1999), 162.

⁶⁷Davidson, *Secrets of the Vietnam War*, 20.

struggle. We also attack the aggressors by recruiting troops and gaining enemy converts.”⁶⁸ The communist Vietnamese attacked all of their enemies, including the United States, using all means available; thus, the communist Vietnamese type of warfare was “waged simultaneously on several fronts—not geographical fronts, but programmatical fronts.”⁶⁹ Dr. George Tanham supports this by stating that, “the central theme of the Communist effort [was] . . . the integration or orchestration of all means—political, economic, psychological, and military—to control the people and seize political power.”⁷⁰ Political *dau tranh* and armed *dau tranh* attack an enemy holistically to unleash a general insurrection, and the communist Vietnamese leaders expected this to be a long struggle. Furthermore, they adapted their military and political approach during ongoing operations, always seeking to maintain the military and political initiative. Most importantly, *dau tranh* is a mosaic approach. A mosaic is a piece of art made with many small colored pieces that, when combined, create a larger picture. A mosaic insurgent approach is where insurgents in one area may be using conventional warfare, in another area using guerrilla warfare, and in a third area using propaganda and terrorism. Furthermore, the local approach would shift depending on the local situation. Again, this supports the notion that multiple centers of gravity shift by time, space, and purpose, especially at the tactical level.⁷¹

⁶⁸Vo Nguyen Giap, *Banner of People’s War, the Party’s Military Line* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 23.

⁶⁹Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 25.

⁷⁰Tanham, xi. See also Max G. Manwaring and John T. Fishel, *Uncomfortable Wars Revisited* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 13-14.

⁷¹Vo Nguyen Giap, *People’s War, People’s Army: The Viet Cong Insurrection Manual for Underdeveloped Countries* (1962; repr., Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2001), 29. See also Giap, *Banner of People’s War, the Party’s Military Line*, xvii; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 25; Davidson, *Secrets of the Vietnam War*, 18, 20-21; Robert Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1969), 48-49; Pike, 226..

According to historian Douglas Pike, there are two major forms of *dau tranh* armed struggle or violence program: regular force strategy and protracted conflict. The communist Vietnamese used these two forms in combination depending on the situation, including regressing to lower levels of violence depending on the relative capabilities of the insurgents and counterinsurgents. Regular force strategy consisted of high technology warfare and limited offensive warfare. Giap used high technology warfare, matching their opponents' technology, and the communist Vietnamese first used this form of regular force strategy in the 1972 Easter Offensive. In response to the failure of the Easter Offensive, the communist Vietnamese used the limited offensive form of warfare, which included the 1975 campaign.⁷²

Protracted conflict was *dau tranh's* second form of violence and divided into classic, or Maoist, guerrilla war and neo-revolutionary guerrilla warfare. In Mao's revolutionary warfare, the conflict progresses through three phases. However, the communist Vietnamese felt that elements of the Mao's theory were not as relevant in their contemporary context, mostly due to advances in technology. Partly based on this, Giap's conception was that the third phase, or the counteroffensive, would consist of a general people's insurrection, which differs from Mao.⁷³

Political *dau tranh* was a broad spectrum of nonmilitary efforts: political, diplomatic, psychological, ideological, sociological, and economic. Like armed *dau tranh*, Pike outlined components of political *dau tranh*. *Dich van* was action among the enemy, *binh van* was action among the military, and *dan van* was action among the people. First, *Dich van* focused on the Vietnamese population controlled by the government of South Vietnam as well as the American population. Second, *binh van* undermined the morale of enemy troops, causing desertion or

⁷²Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 26-27; Davidson, *Secrets of the Vietnam War*, 19; David M. Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything But Learn from It* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 48-49; Pike, 229.

⁷³Pike, 212, 215-216; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 26; Giap, *Banner of People's War, the Party's Military Line*, xix.

eroding combat effectiveness. Third, *dan van* focused on political indoctrination and administration in “liberated areas” in South Vietnam or, in other words, areas of South Vietnam under communist control. *Dan van* was essentially the communist use of the counterinsurgency oil spot technique; thus, the insurgents created ever-expanding areas of control. Overall, political *dau tranh* was a mix of disinformation, propaganda, agitation, uprisings, terror, and subversion.⁷⁴

If armed *dau tranh* defeats the counterinsurgent forces, the insurgents win. Conversely, if the counterinsurgents defeat the insurgents militarily, the insurgents merely revert to the strategic defense to build political and military strength. Thus, the counterinsurgents must defeat the insurgents both militarily and politically to succeed. This success over the insurgents will normally only be temporary if the core grievances that caused and sustained the insurgency remain unresolved. If these core grievances are not resolved, insurgency may reemerge, which it did time and time again in South Vietnam.⁷⁵

Centers of Gravity in Counterinsurgency

This subsection of the literature review examines centers of gravity in counterinsurgency. First, the material below refutes the notion that the population can be a center of gravity. Second, it provides some considerations for operational centers of gravity specific to counterinsurgency,

⁷⁴Pike, 212, 216, 224, 236-246; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 27-28; Davidson, *Secrets of the Vietnam War*, 19. For more on the oil spot technique, see Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History: Two Thousand Years of the Guerrilla at War from Ancient Persia to the Present* (New York: William Morrow and Co, 1994), 153-155, 481, 672, and 711. Page 711 draws an analogy between Che Guevara’s *foco insurreccional* with the oil spot.

⁷⁵Pike, 227; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 25-26; Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, “How Insurgencies End” (Monograph, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2010), 20. See also U.S. Department of Defense, Joint Publication (JP) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2009), III-3 to III-4; Angel Rabasa et al., *Money in the Bank: Lessons Learned from Past Counterinsurgency (COIN) Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007), 71-72; Stephen T. Hosmer and Sibylle O. Crane, *Counterinsurgency: A Symposium, April 16-20, 1962* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1963), 143.

including supporting the notion that multiple centers of gravity vary by time, space, and purpose. Finally, this subsection discusses tactical centers of gravity in counterinsurgency.

The Population: Critical Requirement/Critical Vulnerability

The population is not a center of gravity at any level of war by definition and by Strange's methodology. More specifically, the population cannot be the insurgent center of gravity using Echevarria's interpretation of Clausewitz, nor is the population a center of gravity using Strange's methodology. First, Echevarria's interpretation of Clausewitz shows that a center of gravity is something that draws together or unifies something. In the case of an insurgency, a charismatic leader, such as the Peruvian insurgency Shining Path's leader Abimael Guzmán, and the ideology that underpins an insurgency, such as Guzmán's fierce mix of the thought of Marx, Lenin, and Mao with strong historical appeals to the Incan past, are examples insurgent strategic centers of gravity.⁷⁶ Second, the historical example of Guzmán's as an insurgent charismatic leader demonstrates that by Strange's methodology the population is not a strategic center of gravity. Using Strange's methodology, Guzmán needs the population to support him to reach his end state, and Guzmán's ideology is a key aspect of gaining this support; thus, support of the population is not in itself a center of gravity.

Although not a center of gravity, support of the population is a critical aspect of operational art in counterinsurgency. Support of the population is often an insurgent critical requirement and a critical vulnerability. As a hypothetical example, a charismatic leader who is a strategic center of gravity has several CCs, including the ability to mobilize the population and the ability to generate resources. Support of the population is essential to mobilize the population and generate resources, so support of the population is a CR for both of these CCs. As the

⁷⁶Asprey, 1114-1115; Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (New York: Cambridge, University Press, 2007), 84.

counterinsurgents can contest the insurgency's control of the population, these CRs are also CVs.⁷⁷

In the hypothetical example above, support of the population is both a CR and CV for the insurgents. The same methodology applies for the counterinsurgents. Thus, achieving support of the population in the hypothetical example is a *strategic, operational, and tactical objective* for both belligerents. In other words, support of the population is very important in most cases, but it is definitionally and methodologically inconsistent to refer to the population as the center of gravity.⁷⁸ In fact, if counterinsurgents treat the population as a center of gravity, it is very likely that they will waste resources and, worst case, the insurgents will win.

American efforts in the Philippines in the late nineteenth century are an example of mistakenly treating the population as the center of gravity. The United States forced regime change in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War, and the Philippines became part of the United States foray into "benevolent empire."⁷⁹ There were three campaigns in the Philippine War. The first was the Filipino insurgents fighting against the Spanish at the end of the nineteenth century. When the U.S. went to war with Spain in 1889, the U.S. and Filipino insurgents fought a common Spanish foe. After Spanish capitulation, the U.S. fought to pacify Filipino resistance to U.S. rule; however, the Americans initially focused too much on the population and did not focus enough on the growing insurgency. Protecting the population allowed the insurgency, especially its underground, to burgeon. Thus, American forces allowed the Philippine insurgency to grow unmolested, which is a very vulnerable time in the evolution of an insurgency. While the U.S. may not have had or would not have committed sufficient means to prevent the early insurgency,

⁷⁷Strange, 43-45.

⁷⁸Ibid., 74-75.

⁷⁹Brian McAllister Linn, *The Philippine War, 1899-1902* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 25-26.

this overly population-centric approach demonstrates the fallacy that the insurgents are always the center of gravity. Focusing on the protecting the population and not acting directly against an insurgency both allows the insurgency to grow and cedes the initiative to the insurgency. While the U.S. forces in the Philippines changed their tactics to focus more on the enemy, the insurgents had already become a formidable opponent.⁸⁰

Operational

The operational level and operational art are context for operational centers of gravity. The key tenets of operational art apply in insurgency and counterinsurgency; however, one must adapt these tenets to account for the differences in relative force, time, space, and will.⁸¹ In counterinsurgency insurgents tend to avoid battles. Instead, insurgents often keep their forces dispersed to avoid the normally more militarily powerful and mobile counterinsurgency forces. Insurgents normally have the advantage when protracting the conflict, as Clausewitz noted, “Both belligerents need time; the question is only which of the two can expect to derive *special advantages* from it in light of his own situation.”⁸² Insurgent groups also use different approaches based on their relative strength to their opponents.⁸³

Schneider posited that key characteristics of modern operational art were field armies and distributed logistics, campaigns, operations, maneuver, and battlefields. While insurgents normally do not have field armies, they normally have distributed logistics, campaigns, operations, maneuver, and battlefields. Schneider’s statement that the “hallmark of operational art

⁸⁰Linn, 37-41, 69-70, 88-89; Asprey, 122-133. For more information on the underground, see U.S. Department of Defense, JP 3-24, II-17 to II-18.

⁸¹JP 3-24, II-4.

⁸²Clausewitz, 597.

⁸³David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1968), 43-62.

is the integration of temporally and spatially distributed operations into one coherent whole”⁸⁴ and that simultaneous and successive operations are the crux of operational art apply for insurgent efforts as well; however, these efforts are normally also smaller and distributed further in time. In other words, the insurgents’ normal military inferiority forces them to protract their wars, campaigns, and major operations. Finally, Isserson’s point that modern operations “*must be ready to overcome the entire depth* [Isserson’s emphasis]”⁸⁵ also applies to counterinsurgency. In other words, counterinsurgents should strive to overcome insurgent efforts—both operational and tactical—throughout the entire depth of the theater.

Strachan claimed that “the center of gravity was at the confluence of strategy and tactics,”⁸⁶ illustrating the importance of operational centers of gravity on both the operational level and operational art. Before conducting center of gravity analysis proper, there are two key steps. First, analysis of the strategic context and strategic centers of gravity frame operational center of gravity analysis. Second, operational objectives and the nature of each belligerent determine operational centers of gravity, as an opponent’s operational centers of gravity resist their foe achieving threat objectives and friendly operational centers of gravity facilitate achieving friendly objectives.

An insurgency may disperse to avoid having an operational center of gravity destroyed by counterinsurgent forces, yet an operational center of gravity, such as a key insurgent leader, may exist. “Creating sub-[centers of gravity] is artificial, unless our opponent is too dispersed or

⁸⁴James J. Schneider, “The Loose Marble--and the Origins of Operational Art,” 87-90.

⁸⁵Harrison, *Architect of Soviet Victory in World War II*, 109. Isserson conducted this study in the 1930s.

⁸⁶Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz’s On War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 132.

decentralized to have one [center of gravity].”⁸⁷ Mao’s third stage is an exception. In this case, an insurgency’s operational center of gravity is able to draw operationally significant forces together and employ them to strike the enemy, forming a center of gravity in line with Strange’s model. In the first two stages of Mao’s theory, an operational center of gravity instead will conduct efforts through tactical centers of gravity and tactical centers of critical capabilities.

Tactical

Joint Publication 3-0 defines the tactical “level of war at which battles and engagements are planned and executed to achieve military objectives assigned to tactical units or task forces. Activities at this level focus on “the ordered arrangement and maneuver of combat elements in relation to each other and to the enemy to achieve combat objectives.”⁸⁸ The tactical level of war in counterinsurgency is normally a protracted series of small engagements where the insurgents try to erode the counterinsurgents’ capabilities and will and the counterinsurgents attempt to defeat the insurgents.

The mosaic nature of many insurgencies, such as how the Vietnamese insurgents used *dau tranh* in South Vietnam, tends to focus attention on the tactical level. In fact, the frequent lack of an assailable insurgent operational center of gravity emphasizes tactical areas of operation and tactical activities. Clausewitz noted that “all parts of the whole are interconnected and thus the effects produced, however small their cause, must influence all subsequent military operations and modify their final outcome to some degree, however slight.”⁸⁹ The lack of assailable

⁸⁷Echevarria, “Clausewitz’s Center of Gravity: Changing our Warfighting Doctrine--Again!,” 20.

⁸⁸U.S. Department of Defense, Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations*, Change 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2010), GL-28.

⁸⁹Clausewitz, 158.

operational insurgent centers of gravity further emphasizes the tactical actions in counterinsurgency.

Independent Variables

This monograph's four independent variables are insurgent political purpose, location, approach, and phase. These independent variables are key contextual components that determine centers of gravity at every level of war, and centers of gravity are dependent variables. Not only do the independent variables determine centers of gravity, changes in the independent variables determine when a center of gravity changes. As the literature review discussed, there are often multiple centers of gravity for each level of war. Given the typical "mosaic" nature of counterinsurgency, there are typically more centers of gravity at the tactical level of war in counterinsurgency and the independent variables at the local level impact their corresponding tactical centers of gravity.

Purpose

There are three general insurgent political purposes: change, overthrow, and resistance. Seeking political or economic change on a government is a basic end that most insurgencies share. Second, an insurgency may seek to overthrow and replace a government. Resisting a foreign invader's occupation is a third basic insurgent political purpose. An insurgency may combine these ends and these ends may change depending on the strategic context. In terms of operational art, ends are some of the conditions that make up the insurgent's desired end state. Additionally, the core grievances that underpin the ends are also important to consider for an insurgency's political purpose. Perceived core grievances—which may include identity, religion,

economy, corruption, repression, foreign exploitation or presence, foreign occupation, and inadequate essential services—are the basis of insurgency.⁹⁰

Location

Insurgent centers of gravity vary by location or space. Competent insurgents use space to wear down their opponents' will and tailor local efforts to suit the tactical situation. They often attempt to exploit areas in which counterinsurgents are relatively weak. Insurgents tend to operate fluidly and thereby react quickly to changing conditions. They often have the tactical initiative and can consequently avoid counterinsurgent efforts to decisively engage them. Porous international borders are also key aspects of space. When insurgents can exploit these political boundaries, the borders create sanctuaries. This affords the insurgency a space where they are difficult or impossible to assail, thereby allowing the insurgency to further capability to retain the operational initiative. Finally, single insurgencies may operate alone in an area, but there may be multiple insurgencies operating in the same location. In the case of multiple insurgencies operating in the same area, different insurgent groups may cooperate, ignore, or fight each other depending on their group's ends.⁹¹

Approach

Insurgent approaches include conspiratorial, military-focused, terrorism-focused, identity-focused, protracted popular war, and subversive. The conspiratorial approach involves a small group seizing power and then normally focuses on quickly gaining support of key groups and the population. The military-focused group attempts to reach its ends by acting against the opposing security forces. A terrorism-focused insurgent uses terror to gain and maintain power,

⁹⁰JP 3-24, II-4 to II-7.

⁹¹Ibid., II-4.

and they may focus their efforts on the population, the opposing government, and/or the opposing security forces. Insurgents who use an identity-focused approach based on common identity, such as clan, tribe, religion, or other group identity. Insurgents may use many variations of protracted popular war to erode counterinsurgent physical and psychological strength. Insurgents may also focus on subversion and use relatively less violence to support its subversive efforts. Additionally, insurgencies may use a composite approach or several insurgencies using difference approaches can form a coalition.⁹²

Phase

Insurgent phasing and timing play a key role in determining insurgency centers of gravity. First, insurgents can normally afford to be patient. While they are normally materially inferior to their opponents, they often have a superior strength of will. This often allows them to erode their opponents materially and psychologically over time. From a perspective of phasing and timing, one can view insurgents as being on the defensive, at equilibrium, or on the offensive. Insurgent operations while on the defensive normally can include subversion, terrorism, and guerrilla warfare. These operations often continue during equilibrium, but increase in size and may include some convention warfare. The offensive phase will often include more conventional warfare and the overall conflict will often become more properly viewed as a civil war. The insurgent phasing and timing does not have to be the same on all levels of war simultaneously. For example, an insurgency may be on the strategic defensive, on the operational defensive in one area, and on the tactical offensive in one small area.⁹³

⁹²JP 3-24, II-20 to II-21.

⁹³Ibid., II-4, II-13 to II-16.

Case Study Methodology

There currently is insufficient quantitative data on the four variables in counterinsurgencies to conduct a large-scale quantitative analysis. It is impractical to create a data base for this monograph that would allow large-scale quantitative analysis for insurgencies with multiple centers of gravity, which depend on four variables. It is impractical due to time constraints and the scope of the monograph. Consequently, this monograph uses case studies.

The two case studies focus on the four variables previously identified. The analysis for each case study explores the hypothesis that there are multiple operational and tactical centers of gravity in counterinsurgency and that these centers of gravity vary by insurgent political purpose, location, approach, and phase. Each case study focuses on key time periods where centers of gravity shift. First, the discussion briefly examines the context for key time periods. Second, the discussion demonstrates that there are multiple centers of gravity. Third, the case study demonstrates that shifts in variables cause a resulting shift in centers of gravity change. In other words, the case studies demonstrate that changes in centers of gravity are second-order effects of changes in the variables.

Case Selection

The case studies examined in this monograph are the American involvement in the Vietnam War (1965 to 1973) and the Iraq War (2003-2010). They are contemporary examples of large-scale American counterinsurgency. Both occurred after World War II and involved multiple American divisions, both Army and Marine Corps. In Vietnam, U.S. land forces fought alongside South Vietnamese and other coalition forces against a unitary communist insurgency. In Iraq, U.S. and coalition forces at first fought alone to defeat multiple insurgencies and, subsequently, U.S. and coalition forces fought alongside friendly Iraqi forces to defeat multiple insurgencies.

The two case studies have multiple operational and tactical centers of gravity, although there are more tactical than operational centers of gravity. These two cases studies demonstrate

that these multiple centers of gravity vary by political purpose, location, insurgent approach, and insurgent phase. These case studies also illustrate how incorrect center of gravity analysis led to flawed conceptual planning and ineffective operations. Finally, the Vietnam case study demonstrates that this monograph's thesis is true when countering one insurgency and the Iraq case study demonstrates the validity of the thesis when countering multiple insurgencies.

Limitations

The Vietnam War and the Iraq War are long-term conflicts. Attempting to exhaustively examine changes in centers of gravity for either war is beyond the scope of one monograph, so the case studies will only examine key events. These key events involve changes in the independent variables that in turn change the dependent variable: centers of gravity. Similarly, examination of tactical centers of gravity is limited due to space constraints; therefore, the case studies focus more on the independent and dependent variables at the operational level of war and less on the tactical level of war. The case studies include illustrative examples of changes in tactical centers of gravity.

Many works on counterinsurgency unfortunately lack insurgent perspective; however, the lack of insurgent perspective is even more pervasive the more contemporary the insurgency. As both of the case studies occurred within the last half-century, there is a lack of detailed, unclassified material from the insurgents' perspective, which limits both case studies. There is some translated material available from the communist Vietnamese perspective, but much of the communist Vietnamese material is biased and does not examine their mistakes in any depth. There is even less unclassified material from the various Iraqi insurgent perspectives or, for that matter, Iraqi counterinsurgent perspectives.

The two case studies are not comprehensive; they focus on operational and tactical centers of gravity in counterinsurgency. More importantly, they demonstrate that there are multiple centers of gravity and that centers of gravity vary by insurgent political purpose,

location, insurgent approach, and phase. The case studies also demonstrate that incorrect center of gravity analysis led to suboptimal counterinsurgent approaches.

Case Studies

Vietnam and the Tet Offensive

The focus of this monograph is counterinsurgency operations, not major combat operations. Consequently, this case study minimizes discussion of the communist conventional forces and instead focuses on the communist insurgent forces. This case study treats the time period before and after the communist Tet Offensive as a microcosm of the larger Vietnam War. Additionally, this offensive had immense strategic, operational, and tactical impact on the approaches of all belligerents. The discussion therefore concentrates on the period of 1967 to 1969 and examines multiple insurgent operational and tactical centers of gravity before and after the Tet Offensive.

Strategic Context

While the historical events and processes that led to the Vietnam War are beyond the scope of this monograph, some essential background is necessary. First, American involvement in Vietnam followed a long tradition of Vietnamese resistance to outsiders, most recently the Japanese during the Second World War and the French attempt to reassert their control of Vietnam after the Second World War. The communists defeated the French, which led to the partition of Indochina into Laos, Cambodia, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam. Second, the Vietnam War was a complex war in that it was both an external and internal war. It was external as North Vietnam and its communist supporters fought South Vietnam and its American partners. The Vietnam War also was an internal war as the National Liberation Front (or Viet Cong) fought an insurgency against the forces of South Vietnam and its supporters.

Some strategic context is required for a discussion of operational and tactical centers of gravity before, during, and after the Tet Offensive. There are four broad phases in the Vietnam War from the U.S. perspective. The initial phase was U.S. security force assistance to the Diem government of South Vietnam. The second phase began with the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963 and included growing U.S. involvement in South Vietnam.⁹⁴ The third phase began with the introduction of U.S. ground forces in 1965 ends with the Tet Offensive and other attacks of 1968. The fourth phase was the after the communist offensives of 1968, included the American Vietnamization effort, and ended with the Paris Peace Accords of 1973.

The type of war—limited or unlimited—that each of the belligerents fought impacted the overall conduct of war. While in practice all wars have limits on the means used,⁹⁵ the willingness of a belligerents is important, especially when there is a distinct asymmetry between the belligerents as there was in the Vietnam War. Similarly, Clausewitz wrote, “the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration* [emphasis original].”⁹⁶ To America the Vietnam War was a limited war within the framework of the Cold War. American policy was to maintain a non-communist South Vietnam while avoiding touching off a larger, more destructive war. Consequently, the U.S. strategy in Vietnam had to strike a balance between achieving the desired end state and risking the direct Chinese or Soviet intervention. To South Vietnam the war was total. If South Vietnam could not defeat communist conventional and insurgent forces, South Vietnam would cease to exist. Because of previous assistance of the United States, however, South Vietnam did not fully appreciate this existential

⁹⁴Graham A. Cosmos, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2005), 95-106.

⁹⁵Donald J. Mrozek, *Air Power & the Ground War in Vietnam* (New York: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1989), 167.

⁹⁶Clausewitz, 92.

threat until after U.S. support drastically waned during the Ford administration. To the communist Vietnamese the war was a total war for national unification under communist rule, although the communists portrayed the war as an effort against outsiders and the outsiders' puppets.⁹⁷ From their perspective, the communist Vietnamese desire to reunite Vietnam stemmed from interest and honor. More importantly for this monograph, the core grievances of the insurgent narrative were nationalism, anti-colonialism, and social justice,⁹⁸ although the communist ideology was a key component of the narrative as well.

The asymmetry between belligerents also impacted how the war evolved. As Clausewitz stated, "the degree of force that must be used against the enemy depends on the scale of political demands on either side."⁹⁹ Over the course of the Vietnam War, the communist Vietnamese were willing to escalate means and maintain the use of these additional means more readily than the United States. Nevertheless, this case study focuses on the operational and tactical centers of gravity before, during, and after the Tet Offensive.

⁹⁷John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 155-163. See also Maurice Matloff, ed., *American Military History* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1988), 619; Wray R. Johnson, *Vietnam and American Doctrine for Small Wars* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2001), 23-24; Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine: 1942-1976* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2006), 223; H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 23; Davidson, *Secrets of the Vietnam War*, 20.

⁹⁸Austin Long, "On 'Other War': Lessons from Five Decades of RAND Counterinsurgency Research" (Monograph, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2006), 36; John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 117; Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 90-91; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 474-479.

⁹⁹Clausewitz, 585, 605-606.

Before Tet

Throughout the Vietnam War, the communist Vietnamese used *dau tranh* to attack their foes politically and militarily; however, the communist Vietnamese insurgents always fought first politically and second militarily. The Americans, however, used a strategy of attrition, feeling that it “offered the Army the prospect of winning the war quickly, or at least more quickly than with traditional counterinsurgency operations.”¹⁰⁰ The issue was that there were insufficient enemy forces exposed to attrition.

Instead of massing battalions conveniently for American attritional efforts, the communists would cycle through the tactical offense, equilibrium, and defense, as appropriate to the situation, and maintain military and psychological pressure on the Americans and South Vietnamese. The communist response to American firepower and advanced technology was to disperse their forces. By dispersing, the communists controlled the tempo of attrition and, consequently, the “long war in Vietnam [was] fought almost exclusively on the tactical level.”¹⁰¹

The communists tailored their approach to fit the local conditions, using both North Vietnamese regular forces and South Vietnamese insurgent forces. These regular and insurgent forces focused on executing small, well-planned precision strikes and mounting multiple daily attacks, thereby varying their tactical approach by location and time. While these tactical iterations eroded both sides, the communist Vietnamese were more willing to accept this tactical protracted attrition to hold the village and hamlets. The intent of these methods was to erode military strength and, more importantly, undermine the enemy’s morale. The steady escalation of these efforts was to culminate in a major attack, such as Dien Bien Phu, that would impact enemy

¹⁰⁰Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 164.

¹⁰¹Clayton R. Newell, “On Operational Art,” in *On Operational Art*, ed. Clayton R. Newell and Michael D. Krause (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1994), 12.

military and political will. Additionally, the Viet Cong were very adept at capturing and disseminating tactical lessons, where the Americans and South Vietnamese were not.¹⁰²

By mid-1967, the American commitment of ground troops hindered communist progress. While the mosaic approach of *dau tranh* was slowly proceeding at the operational and tactical levels, the Vietnamese communists viewed the war as strategic stalemate. Despite the apparent stagnation of their strategic approach, the communist Vietnamese felt they were in a position to attempt to spark a general uprising in South Vietnam. They planned to seize the strategic, operational, and tactical initiative, and they scheduled their offensive to begin during the Tet holiday of 1968—the Tet Offensive.¹⁰³

Before the Tet Offensive there were no operational insurgent centers of gravity in South Vietnam, nor were there many operational communist conventional centers of gravity in South Vietnam. Insurgent forces remained dispersed down to the tactical level to avoid detection and destruction. The sanctuaries just over the Cambodian, Laotian, and North Vietnamese borders were operational centers of gravity; however, America and South Vietnam did not allow conventional land forces to attack across these borders. The communist forces that attacked Khe Sanh were an operational center of gravity; however, the efforts of these forces were merely a shaping operation for the actual Tet Offensive. More specifically, the attacks on Khe Sanh were a deception effort designed to convince the Americans and South Vietnamese that the main

¹⁰²Davidson, *Secrets of the Vietnam War*, 19-20; Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), 148-149; Thompson, 33, 50-54; Long, 37; Nagl, 133; Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina* (1961; repr., Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994), 351; Pike, 226-227; Tanham, 78-80, 85-93, 102-108.

¹⁰³James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 9. For more information on the general uprising aspect of *dau tranh*, see Toczek, 51-52; Pike, 218-219; Sam C. Sarkesian, *Unconventional Conflicts in a New Security Era* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 87.

offensive would come on the periphery of South Vietnam and not the urban areas of South Vietnam.¹⁰⁴

In addition to Khe Sanh, the communists planned multiple operational and tactical efforts that were supporting efforts to the larger deception operation. Communist conventional forces conducted a tactical attack on the border town of Song Be near the Cambodian border, and communist insurgents conducted a similar attack at Loc Ninh, another border town and provincial capital. Giap's final shaping operation was an operational-level attack—four conventional regiments—in the Dak To region. Unfortunately for the communists, these battles did not draw enough U.S. forces away from the communist objectives for the Tet Offensive.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, these efforts demonstrate that the communists formed multiple operational and tactical centers of gravity that varied by purpose, location, and phase.

The communist Vietnamese had three objectives for the Tet Offensive. The most important was to spark the aforementioned general uprising amongst the people of South Vietnam. Second, this offensive was to defeat the armed forces of South Vietnam and America. Third, the Tet Offensive was to convince the Americans that communist victory was inevitable. The plan called for a three-pronged offensive to bring about a popular uprising. Supporting operations in outlying regions were to draw forces and attention away from the urban areas, the actual objectives of the offensive. Second, the main effort was a countrywide attack on cities, key units, headquarters, communications, and air bases. In order to conduct these attacks, the communist Vietnamese would concentrate formerly dispersed forces, forming conventional and insurgent operational and tactical centers of gravity. Third, the communists executed a massive *binh van*—action among the military—effort to get South Vietnamese forces to flip to support the

¹⁰⁴Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 468.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 468-469; Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*, 15-22.

communist Vietnamese. Additionally, major communist efforts in May and August 1968 followed the Tet offensive.¹⁰⁶

After Tet

The military results of Tet were horrendous for the communist Vietnamese. From a communist perspective, “after the summer campaign of 1969 a major portion of our main force army was forced to withdraw . . . to regroup . . . the strength of our local forces was seriously eroded.”¹⁰⁷ From an American point of view, “for once we could find him . . . and the cost to him was enormous militarily.”¹⁰⁸ The communist guerrilla forces in South Vietnam never recovered, and North Vietnamese regular forces did much of the fighting for the remainder of the war. The Tet Offensive, however, had a more important political impact: “The confidence of the American people had been badly shaken.”¹⁰⁹ Not only did Tet end General Westmoreland’s tenure as the American military commander in Vietnam, but President Johnson chose not to run for another term and the South Vietnamese government believed that the U.S. was losing its resolve to continue the war.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*, 10-13, 66-68; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 442-443; Davidson, *Secrets of the Vietnam War*, 98; Spector, 25.

¹⁰⁷The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 246.

¹⁰⁸Robert Komer, “Robert Komer Recalls Tet’s Impact,” in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Robert J. McMahon (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 327.

¹⁰⁹Clark M. Clifford, “Clark M. Clifford Remembers His Post-Tet Questions (1968), 1969,” in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Robert J. McMahon (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 329. See also Karnow, 538-565.

¹¹⁰Sam C. Sarkesian, *America’s Forgotten Wars: The Counterrevolutionary Past and the Lessons for the Future* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 207; Lewis Sorely, ed. *Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes 1968-1972* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), xviii; Spector, 299, 311-316; Karnow, 594, 578-581.

The American approach changed significantly in early 1969 due to the Tet Offensive. For the Americans, the “One War” concept and Vietnamization came to the fore. While Vietnamization was an American policy decision, the “One War” concept permeated all three levels of war, although it had profound impacts on the operational level of war. The “One War” concept linked military efforts with pacification. Additionally, the Americans and South Vietnamese placed more emphasis on the Phoenix Program. After Tet, Phoenix more effectively attacked the Vietnamese insurgent infrastructure.¹¹¹

The failure of Tet required the communists to adapt their military efforts. The insurgent effort had lost many of its personnel and its underground infrastructure. As a result, the communists reverted back to dispersing their forces, thereby changing their operational and tactical approaches. After several months of experimentation and development, the communist Vietnamese began to use neo-revolutionary guerrilla warfare in some areas. The underpinning notion was to remain at stage two of classic guerrilla warfare, thereby avoiding concentrating forces. Elite guerrilla forces would again take up the routine of precision strikes and mounting multiple daily attacks. They coupled this approach with increased operations by North Vietnamese conventional forces in South Vietnam. Many communist leaders, however, felt that

¹¹¹Sorely, 19-20; Thompson, 145-161. The one war concept essentially viewed the Vietnam War as one effort, not a conventional effort and a pacification effort conducted separately. Robert W. Komer, *Organization and Management of the ‘New Model’ Pacification Program-1966-1969* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1970), 257; Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1972), 104-105; William Colby, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America’s Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (New York: Contemporary Books, 1989), 271-272. For more information on Operation Phoenix, see Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, KY: Lexington Books, 1990), 71-98; Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam*, 2nd ed. (Omaha, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 242-244; Thomas L. Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 318-320; Colby, 331-334; Karnow, 617-618.

this approach would never generate enough momentum to lead to victory. In fact, communist Vietnamese leaders vowed to never again risk all of their military forces.¹¹²

Strategic Denouement

Despite their earlier vow, the communist leaders did plan and execute a major offensive in 1972. This Easter Offensive, however, did not have to contend with American ground forces. Due to Vietnamization, only South Vietnamese ground forces and American advisors remained. Thus, the communist Vietnamese concentrated conventional forces, which formed an operational center of gravity. In fact, the communist forces staged major attacks in three separate areas simultaneously. South Vietnamese forces fought well, albeit with many American advisors and ample American air support. However, the communist Vietnamese were still more willing to sacrifice more than their South Vietnamese foes.¹¹³

After the 1972 failed Easter offensive, the North Vietnamese Central Committee examined its strategy to defeat South Vietnam and its supporters. Communist forces had recovered from previous operations and, with the withdrawal of American ground forces and American difficulty with direct intervention, were growing stronger than their South Vietnamese foe's military forces; however, some party members were concerned that a major offensive with Soviet and Chinese support could backfire and draw direct American intervention. The committee consequently compromised. They decided to shift from primarily focusing on the political to focusing on the military aspect of *dau tranh* and continue to erode South Vietnamese military and psychological strength. This strategy quickly began to affect the South Vietnamese, whose

¹¹²Pike, 227-229; Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and American in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 732-733; Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 218; James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 67.

¹¹³Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 122-155; Karnow, 654-658, 673-674.

military forces struggled in 1973 and 1974. This strategy so weakened the South Vietnamese psychologically, that they rapidly collapsed in 1975. In fact, the speed of the final offensive campaign that toppled South Vietnam even surprised the communist Vietnamese.¹¹⁴

The complexity of the Vietnam War was the genesis of the concept of “mosaic warfare.” Both before and after the Tet Offensive, local circumstances drove the communists’ tactical purpose, approach, and phase. Thus, North Vietnamese conventional forces could be conducting offensive operations in a South Vietnamese province adjacent to an area where communist insurgents were mobilizing the population of a South Vietnamese hamlet and avoiding combat. While this approach was successful at the tactical level before and after Tet, lack of strategic progress led to the communists to attempt to foment a general uprising with the Tet Offensive as an operational catalyst. The analysis of the insurgent centers of gravity before and after the Tet Offensive demonstrates that there were multiple insurgent strategic, operational, and tactical centers of gravity that varied by insurgent political purpose, location, approach, and phase.

Iraq and “The Surge”

The focus of this monograph is counterinsurgency operations, not major combat operations that force regime change in a foe’s nation state. Consequently, this case study does not address the invasion of Iraq. Rather, the analysis concentrates on the period of insurgency after the spring and summer of 2003. However, the invasion itself and subsequent occupation acted as core grievances of many of the insurgent groups. This case study examines multiple insurgent operational and tactical centers of gravity before and after the U.S. change in theater strategy, commonly known as “The Surge.” The Iraq case study is different from the Vietnam case study

¹¹⁴Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 196-198, 256-258; Karnow, 676-684.

in that multiple insurgent groups were operating in Iraq where there was a single insurgent group operating in Vietnam.

Strategic Context

When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, the existing regime and its security apparatus fractured and subsequently seemed to dissipate like so much vapor.¹¹⁵ This was partly due to coalition combat operations, coalition informational efforts, Iraqi design,¹¹⁶ and the centralized nature of the Iraqi government. In the years following 2003, the Iraq War was multifaceted and often difficult for non-Iraqis to fathom. The Iraq War has several key points: a change in strategic center of gravity, examples of unbalanced counterinsurgency approaches (including both enemy-focused and population-centric approaches, the previous discussion of the initial American approach in the Philippines is an example of an unbalanced population-centric approach), and a mosaic nature similar yet more complex than that of the Vietnam War.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime, the United States chose to remain in Iraq¹¹⁷ rather than treat the operation as a punitive expedition. Thus, the United States forced regime change in Iraq.¹¹⁸ Despite establishing a transitional military authority,¹¹⁹ a tremendous power and governance vacuum existed after the fall of the Iraqi central government. The task of

¹¹⁵Bruce R. Pirnie and Edward O'Connell, *Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006)* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 9.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹⁷Steven Metz, *Iraq & The Evolution of American Strategy* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc., 2008), 121; Steven Metz, "Decisionmaking in Operation Iraqi Freedom: Removing Saddam Hussein by Force" (Monograph, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2010), 47.

¹¹⁸Wright and Reese, 27-29, 41-42.

¹¹⁹Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 3-07, *Stability Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2008), 5-2.

working on post-invasion Iraq fell to Jay Garner. Garner led the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA).¹²⁰ For reasons beyond the scope of this monograph, this civilian transitional military authority was not capable of accomplishing its mission.¹²¹ The failure of ORHA meant squandering the “golden window” of post-conflict termination: the first year after hostilities.¹²² In fact, Iraq was in a state of anarchy or, as Metz aptly stated, “It was ‘Lord of the Flies’ on a monumental scale.”¹²³ The meager resources—insufficient numbers of security forces and insufficient reconstruction capability and capacity—allowed several future threat groups to gestate, which included several proto-insurgencies to coalesce.¹²⁴ In more traditional insurgency terms, these groups were in the latent and incipient phase of insurgency.¹²⁵

Before “The Surge”

When forces of the United States occupied Baghdad,¹²⁶ they occupied a strategic objective thereby collapsing a strategic center of gravity. As mentioned previously, if a strategic

¹²⁰Dale R. Herspring, *Rumsfeld's Wars: The Arrogance of Power* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 125-127.

¹²¹Metz, *Iraq & The Evolution of American Strategy*, 132-134, 152-153; Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 472; Wright and Reese, 149-153.

¹²²James Stephenson, *Losing the Golden Hour: An Insider's View of Iraq's Reconstruction* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2007), 36,155.

¹²³Steven Metz, “Decisionmaking in Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Strategic Shift of 2007” (Monograph, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2010), 1.

¹²⁴David C. Gompert and John Gordon IV, “War by Other Means: Building Complete and Balanced Capabilities for Counterinsurgency” (Monograph, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2008), 37-40. For additional information on proto-insurgencies, see Daniel Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007), 1-6.

¹²⁵U.S. Department of Defense, JP 3-24, II-14; U.S. Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 7-98, *Operations in a Low-intensity Conflict* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1992), 2-13 to 2-17.

¹²⁶Gordon and Trainor, 432-433.

center of gravity falls, the enemy should collapse at that level of war. In this case, the Iraqi nation and military did indeed collapse after Baghdad fell. In addition to Baghdad, there was another strategic center of gravity: Saddam Hussein. This second strategic center of gravity, however, went into hiding while his nation shattered.¹²⁷ Although he remained at large, he no longer had a tangible operational center of gravity. Because of continued survival, the Ba'athist resistance would later re-emerge. Overall, the initial U.S. campaign is an example of the collapse of one enemy strategic center of gravity—Baghdad—and the severing of a second strategic center of gravity—Saddam Hussein—from its operational centers of gravity. The lull in enemy efforts and apparent lack of capabilities appeared to indicate a Coalition strategic victory; however, this lull was merely a period where new centers of gravity emerged.

During the period immediately after the fall of Baghdad, there were no operational centers of gravity, as there are no operational centers of gravity for an emergent insurgency that is in the latent and incipient phase. The insurgency is normally too small and lacks sufficient capability and capacity to act on the operational level of war. Instead, a latent and incipient insurgency has emerging tactical centers of gravity. These may be early insurgent leaders and associated nascent underground infrastructure. Instead, small groups of guerrilla fighters coalesced during this period.

There were several emergent insurgent groups in 2003 in Iraq. Although there were other smaller groups, *On Point II* listed seven major groups of insurgents: Sunni Arabs, secular ideologues, Sunni tribes, religious groups, ultra radical Salafis and Wahhabis, Shia groups, and Al-Qaeda and other foreign groups. These multiple groups emerged and grew quickly given the security and power vacuum. Each of these groups had their own goals and approaches; however, elements of these major groups had different approaches depending on local conditions. For

¹²⁷Gordon and Trainor, 434.

example, local conditions dictated if a group was conducting offensive guerrilla warfare or if a group had to remain hidden and terrorize the local population. While these groups often fought each other, the Coalition was a common foe.¹²⁸ Consequently, the Coalition attempted to stabilize the situation in an environment that included a confusing array of multiple groups with multiple emerging tactical centers of gravity.

Local tactical commanders took unique approaches in their areas of operation to counter the emerging enemy tactical centers of gravity, which is appropriate given this shifting mosaic of insurgents and irregular actors. The real challenge for each unit was finding the right balance of aggressive counterinsurgency operations with stability operations given the operational environment and resources. When the 4th Infantry Division relieved the Marines in Tikrit, they used an enemy-focused approach that some historians view as heavy-handed; however, the division used a multifaceted approach, although initially the approach was likely too aggressive. Similarly, some historians feel the 82nd Airborne Division used an overly enemy-centric approach; however, the division task force defined its overall objective as winning the support of the Iraqi people. The 101st Airborne Division's used a less-enemy centric approach than the 4th Infantry Division or the 82nd Airborne Division, but this approach was appropriate for the area of operations and given the 101st Airborne Division's combat power in relation to area of

¹²⁸Wright and Reese, 87, 105-110. For more information on the emergent Iraqi insurgent groups, see Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 17-124, 347-348; Thomas R. Mockaitis, *Iraq and the Challenge of Counterinsurgency* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 103-107; Thomas R. Mockaitis, *The Iraq War: Learning from the Past, Adapting to the Present, and Planning for the Future* (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, 2007), 25-31; Bing West, *The Strongest Tribe: War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2008), 9-13, 18-20, 28-36; Carter Malkasian, "Counterinsurgency in Iraq: May 2003-January 2007," in *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*, ed. Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2008), 241-242; Metz, *Iraq & The Evolution of American Strategy*, 147-148, 151-152; Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 190-191, 197, 215-216; Peter R. Mansoor, *Baghdad at Sunrise: A Brigade Commander's War in Iraq* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 28.

operations, the size of the Iraqi population, and the local threat. The 1st Armored Division took an approach that focused on fighting for intelligence or fighting based on intelligence. While the division performed well, the growing threat, however, meant that the division lacked the combat power to deal with the emerging insurgent forces and instability.¹²⁹ Ultimately, there were insufficient Coalition forces to deal with multiple enemies, each of which “is a hydra with numerous heads and no single center of gravity.”¹³⁰

The three years that followed the emergence of multiple insurgencies were bloody and chaotic. The fighting, however, reached a new level in 2006 when Sunni extremists attacked the al-Askari Mosque. The Sunni destruction of this key Shia mosque unleashed a new, unprecedented wave of sectarian violence. Thus, insurgent groups and other irregular actors fought each other and anyone who attempted to quell the violence. If this event did not change the nature of the conflict, it certainly underscored the need to address sectarian violence. Policy makers consequently realized they had to craft a “new” strategy for Iraq.

Although it did not change the strategic ends, this “new” strategy called for changes in ways and increased means in order to decrease the risk of strategic failure. This revised strategy became the so-called “Surge.”¹³¹ The increase in means came in additional military and non military resources. Importantly for this case study, the key military component of “The Surge” was to increase ground forces. The new ways for the strategy of “The Surge” incorporated lessons that U.S. forces had learned in combat since 2003. The key aspect of the new ways was a change

¹²⁹Wright and Reese, 113, 199, 121-123, 127-129, 322-325; Gordon and Trainor, 447-448; Malkasian, 243-244; Ricks, 228-234.

¹³⁰Mockaitis, *The Iraq War: Learning from the Past, Adapting to the Present, and Planning for the Future*, 26.

¹³¹Quotations are used here as many authors argue convincingly that “The Surge” did not represent a real shift in U.S. strategy for Iraq. See Metz, *Iraq & The Evolution of American Strategy*, 184.

in operational approach. The additional ground forces were to clear and hold Baghdad with the objective of securing the population and, hopefully, earning the support of a greater portion of the population. From a U.S. policy perspective, the strategy relied on improved security and support from the population to allow for an Iraqi political settlement.¹³²

“The Surge”

As the Coalition commander in Iraq as of February 10, 2003, General Petraeus oversaw the implementation of an operational approach that focused on protecting the population. As “The Surge” increased the combat power available to the Coalition by five U.S. Army brigades and two U.S. Marine infantry battalions, with additional military police, aviation, a division headquarters, and other enablers. These additional forces and forces already in Iraq increased the tactical ground density of Coalition forces in key areas in Iraq, especially Baghdad. For the clear phase, the additional combat power allowed Coalition commanders to mass combat power and effects to achieve tactical objectives and deal with the multitude of insurgent tactical centers of gravity. For the hold phase, the additional combat power allowed dispersion of forces not involved in clearing, specifically dispersed in small outposts called joint security stations. Thus, the additional combat power allowed tactical sequencing of concentrating combat power to clear an area and then dispersing combat power to hold an area.¹³³

¹³²Malkasian, 257-259; Metz, *Iraq & The Evolution of American Strategy*, 173-174; David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128-130. The nonmilitary aspects of “The Surge” are beyond the scope of this monograph.

¹³³Dale Andrade, *Surging South of Baghdad: The 3d Infantry Division and Task Force Marne in Iraq, 2007-2008* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2010), 8, 16-22, 101-102; Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, 119-122, 128-129, 135-141; Pirnie and O’Connell, 15-19; Metz, “Decisionmaking in Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Strategic Shift of 2007,” 4-5; Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), 25-45, 88-89; Malkasian, 258; West, 228-229.

On June 15, 2007, Coalition forces began several major operations outside of Baghdad. This was a change in the operational approach. Coalition commanders coupled successful operations in Baghdad with operations outside of the capital; thus, relative tactical combat power now allowed a change in operational art: simultaneity instead of sequencing. The point was to conduct simultaneous tactical operations to prevent terrorists to simply move from point-to-point away from Coalition pressure and thereby gain an operational effect on the enemy.¹³⁴ More specifically, the Coalition approach undermined the enemy's tactical flexibility to choose its purpose, approach, and phase by location. Instead, the Coalition had the combat power to seize and retain the operational and tactical initiative. The insurgent groups, however, would regenerate and fight in other areas, such as Anbar province.¹³⁵

The surge efforts were successful in the short- and medium-term, as they created some breathing space in the violence, a vital condition for potential political negotiations. While “The Surge” gets most of the credit for creating this breathing space, there were many other military and nonmilitary efforts that contributed to the reducing the violence. One area that is often sadly neglected is the Iraqis themselves. Not only was the population weary of the violence, Iraqis joined their new nation's security forces in the thousands. Like the additional “Surge” forces, these forces also added combat power to fight the insurgent groups and help reduce sectarian violence, although building the capacity of the Iraqi security forces pre-dated “The Surge.” However, some also speculate that the declining sectarian violence had more to do with the

¹³⁴Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, 144-145; West, 273-274.

¹³⁵Andrade, *Surging South of Baghdad*, 209; West, 250.

completion of sectarian cleansing; nevertheless, the overall efforts reduced the level of insurgent and sectarian violence in Baghdad.¹³⁶

Ongoing Strategic Presence

At the time of writing this monograph, insurgent and sectarian violence continues in Iraq. The United States continues to maintain military forces in Iraq; however, the future of these forces is open to speculation. Currently, there is no political agreement between the U.S. and Iraq to keep U.S. forces in Iraq after December 2012. However, it is unclear if all U.S. forces will depart. If some U.S. forces remain, the size of the U.S. forces in Iraq is unclear. The U.S. forces that stay would likely conduct security force assistance, primarily as trainers and advisors supporting Iraqi security forces.

The Iraq War was a “perfect storm” of circumstances and initial mistakes¹³⁷ followed by rapid tactical and operational adaptation. The Coalition’s “Surge” was a strategic effort that attempted to institutionalize field adaptations, increase the means available in theater, and to better nest theater ends, ways, and means. The analysis of the insurgent centers of gravity before and after “The Surge” demonstrates that there were multiple insurgent strategic, operational, and tactical centers of gravity that varied by insurgent political purpose, location, approach, and phase.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This monograph’s literature review examined Clausewitz’s original center of gravity concept, interpretations of Clausewitz’s concept, key insurgent theory, centers of gravity in

¹³⁶Malkasian, 255-256; Metz, *Iraq & The Evolution of American Strategy*, 186-190; Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, 141-143; Andrade, *Surging South of Baghdad*, 199-208; West, 237, 250-251.

¹³⁷Andrade, *Surging South of Baghdad*, 211; West, 222-223, 248-251.

counterinsurgency, and the independent variables used in the case studies. The centers of gravity in counterinsurgency subsection also explained the vital point that the population is not a center of gravity; rather, the support of the population is often a critical requirement/critical vulnerability. The methodology section explained the case study selection and limitations of the methodology. The cases studies validated the hypothesis that there are multiple centers of gravity in counterinsurgency that vary by insurgent purpose, location, approach, and phase. However, the case studies also outlined the difficulties of affecting insurgent operational and tactical centers of gravity if insurgents vary their efforts by local conditions. This challenge becomes more acute if there are multiple insurgent groups and other violent actors in the same area of operations. Overall, this underscores the difficulty of directly acting against an insurgent operational center of gravity and thereby achieving decisive results.

Recommendations

Centers of gravity continue to be relevant; however, leaders and planners need to place them in their proper context for understanding and planning counterinsurgency operations. By placing them in context, understanding there are often more than one at any level of war, and understanding they vary by insurgent purpose, location, approach, and phase, previous material on centers of gravity is useful for counterinsurgency. Center of gravity analysis from the proper point of view can support effective counterinsurgency campaign planning and help avoid the historical conceptual planning issues, such as improperly focusing on just the insurgents or just protecting the population.

Support of the Population: A Critical Requirement/Critical Vulnerability

As mentioned in the literature review and discussed in the case studies, the population is not a center of gravity. Rather, operational leaders and planners should understand that the support of the population is often a critical requirement and a critical vulnerability. As a likely

insurgent and friendly critical requirement and critical vulnerability, the support of the population is often an objective for insurgents and counterinsurgents. This is also true on more than one level of war and for both the insurgents and counterinsurgents. Regardless of approach, insurgents are often dependent on a portion of the population for resources, such as food and shelter, and for protection, often in the form of early warning and concealment. Counterinsurgents, especially foreign forces conducting counterinsurgents, are often dependent on a segment of the population for human intelligence. Consequently, the support of the population should be a strategic, operational, and tactical objective for both insurgents and counterinsurgents.

Approach Should Fit the Environment

There must be a proper balance between countering the actual insurgency and protecting the population; this is not binary or an “either/or” question. Instead, it is a question of balancing enemy-centric and population-centric activities given the current environment. Proper center of gravity analysis will determine an initial balance from which forces can quickly adapt.

Treating the population as a center of gravity will often skew the balance between attacking insurgent centers of gravity and efforts to protect and positively influence a critical requirement/critical vulnerability. Leaders and planners involved in counterinsurgency must look for the actual centers of gravity and properly treat the support of the population as an objective. Clausewitz, Strange, and Echevarria’s works would point to the notion that centers of gravity will form to attack or defend this objective. While this may seem overly nuanced or superfluous, treating the people as the center of gravity will naturally result in an approach that overemphasizes protecting the people at the potential price of ceding the insurgents the operational initiative. Conversely, not protecting the people leaves a critical vulnerability open to insurgent activities and, more importantly, the possible second-order effect of center of gravity destruction and the cascading third-order effect of friendly collapse. Overall, proper balance between will improve the probability of counterinsurgent success.

Risk and Opportunity of Fighting an Insurgent Mosaic

The two case studies demonstrated that counterinsurgency often occurs in a complex operational environment. Consequently, countering an insurgency requires understanding the operational environment, which the monograph often refers to as a mosaic. Not only should leaders and planners understand that the operational environment is a mosaic—insurgents vary their purpose depending on the circumstances, use localized approaches in multiple areas of operations, and change over time. Multiple insurgent groups operating with or near other violent actors only add to the complexity and difficulty of counterinsurgency operations. Nevertheless, this complexity carries both risk and opportunity. Normally counterinsurgents are relatively strong compared to insurgents, and insurgents normally disperse their forces to avoid destruction. Savvy counterinsurgents can take advantage of this to seize the operational initiative, much like the Coalition forces did in Iraq 2007; however, this requires a sufficient relative combat power advantage to allow the feasible balance between protecting the population and conducting offensive operations directly against the insurgency.

Conclusion

U.S. land forces have continuously conducted counterinsurgency operations for nearly a decade. These operations have occurred in several countries, but most importantly in Iraq and Afghanistan. Looking to the future, it almost seems inevitable that the U.S. will either conduct counterinsurgency operations or at least support another host nation government to conduct counterinsurgency. Naturally, the American military must be able to quickly and effectively adapt to effectively fight insurgent foes, and it is essential that the U.S. military services capture and internalize the hard-won lessons of the past decade. While there are many areas to capture these lessons, future joint and service doctrine must capture what has been learned with respect to enduring fundamentals and successful tactics, techniques, and procedures, thereby continuing the to improve on the key doctrinal effort of FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5.

Planning and conducting counterinsurgency campaigns and major operations are key aspects of operational art in counterinsurgency operations. More importantly, the U.S. military must capture the operational art lessons of the recent wars and internalize these lessons. Understanding centers of gravity in counterinsurgency at the operational and tactical levels is a vital part of these efforts. Centers of gravity point to several key ideas and concepts that aid in conducting counterinsurgency as a whole and at each level of war. However, “[i]f everything is a center of gravity, nothing is.”¹³⁸ The population is clearly not a center of gravity. Instead, support of the population is normally essential for U.S. involvement in counterinsurgency and important for most insurgent approaches—a critical requirement/critical vulnerability for both sides.

This monograph examined centers of gravity, particularly in counterinsurgency operations in the context of multiple insurgent groups operating in one area of operations and insurgent groups using localized approaches. The two case studies demonstrated that rather than one static, monolithic center of gravity, there are multiple operational and tactical centers of gravity in counterinsurgency. Fighting an insurgency or multiple insurgencies is fighting a mosaic war, and centers of gravity determine the nature of tactical areas of operation—or, to continue the metaphor, each piece of the mosaic—and these centers of gravity vary by insurgent political purpose, location, approach, and phase. Quantitative study and additional qualitative analysis could further underscore that the independent variables—purpose, location, approach, and phase—cause multiple operational and tactical centers of gravity to shift. More importantly, this additional study may facilitate better understanding and practice of operational art in counterinsurgency operations.

¹³⁸Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 185.

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